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Former Glory, July 27, 2018-January 20, 2019

The American flag is an icon of patriotism, imbued with political gravitas and cultural significance. In 1824, Captain William Driver was gifted an American flag that would accompany him on many voyages during his 20-year career. He allegedly wrote, "It has ever been my staunch companion and protection. Savages and heathens, lowly and oppressed, hailed and welcomed it at the far end of the wide world. Then, why should it not be called Old Glory?"

This exhibition considers Old Glory—a term that has come to refer to all U.S. flags—in the context of our time. President Trump's desire to restore the United States to its "former glory," making it "great" again, reimagines a bygone era that may never have existed, stoking a nostalgia sustained by bigotry. As a representation of national identity, the flag supposedly represents a diversity of people, but it has also been used to substantiate ideas of American exceptionalism and exclusion.

Spanning more than 150 years, the objects in this gallery question our emotional connections to the flag by exploring its messages across domestic and international communities. Humorous, confrontational, critical, and sentimental, these varied works acknowledge and reflect on American nationalism and our complex histories.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Ed Rossbach, American, 1914-2002
Western Star, 1989
Plaited ash splints, cotton plain weave, rawhide, and faux fur; bottom half covered with rice paper pattern with heat-transfer printing
Purchased with funds from the National Endowment for the Arts and the generosity of the Museum Associates 1990.003

Made to resemble Indigenous American beadwork, these flags, figures, and horses were drawn on graph paper, heat-transferred to rice paper, and grafted to a basket base for a tessellated effect.

Beginning in the 1880s, flags became common in Plains Native American embellishment. Representations and use of the flag varied, with some Natives adopting it to show they were no longer a threat or to appeal to non-Indigenous buyers. Native Americans also proudly carry the flag as patriots, service people, and veterans: per capita, their rate of military service is higher than any other ethnic group, a statistic that has remained constant for more than 200 years. Ironically, they were not legally recognized as citizens until 1924, and some Indigenous Americans weren't allowed to vote until 1962.

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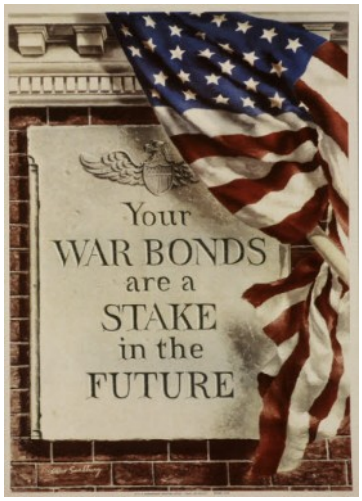
Artist Ed Rossbach borrowed freely from non-Western traditions. A self-proclaimed experimentalist, his simplified renderings can also be deemed cultural appropriation.

Sándor Bodó, American, b. 1953
Flag, 1991
Book containing 26 color chromogenic prints
Gift of the Artists' Development Fund of the Rhode Island Foundation
1994.073

A flag is a simple arrangement of shapes and colors.
A flag unites.
A flag isolates.
A flag excludes.
A flag inspires.
A flag warns.
A flag demarcates.
A flag triggers emotions.
A flag is a sign.
A flag carries a history.
A flag is a simple arrangement of shapes and colors.

–Sandor Bodo

Allen Saallburg, American, 1899–1987
Your War Bonds are a Stake in the Future, 1943
Color photo -offset lithograph on paper
Gift of Samuel M. Cate 2000.112.9



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American
Suppport Our Boys in Cambodia, ca. 1970
Color screenprint on paper (printed at RISD)
Gift of John Prip 2002.113.3

American
Untitled, ca. 1970
Photo screenprint on cardboard (printed at RISD)
Gift of John Prip 2002.113.8A

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Klaus Maertens
Dr. Martens, English, 1960
Men's Shoes with Flag Pattern, ca. 1990
Leather upper with composition sole
Gift of C. Ondine Chavoya 2002.95.26

Dave Cole, American, b. 1975
American Flag (Toy Soldiers #12), August 2002
Wood panel, plastic soldiers, and acrylic paint
Gift of Dr. Armand Versaci 2003.119

In this piece, hundreds of green toy soldiers have been melted and painted in red, white, and blue acrylic. They homogenize so completely as to become the flag itself. After volunteering at Ground Zero, where the World Trade Center towers collapsed on 9/11, Providence sculptor Dave Cole began to create flag sculptures composed of plastic toy soldiers. Soldiers are equated with patriotism, and here the blended figurines recall ideas of collectivity prominent in nationalist rhetoric. The presence of "play" guns suggests the ongoing, devastating impact of American counterterrorism initiatives.

Xander Marro, American, b. 1973
Be Patriotic, Dirt Palace, 2002
Color screenprint on wallpaper
Museum Purchase: Gift of the Artists' Development Fund of the Rhode Island Foundation 2007.40.4

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Jungil Hong, American, b.1976, (RISD BFA 1999, Ceramics; RISD MFA 2015, Textiles)
Bombs Can't..., Dirt Palace, 2002
Color screenprint on paper
Museum Purchase: Gift of the Artists' Development Fund of the Rhode Island Foundation 2007.40.5

Art Hazelwood, American, b.1961
Habeus Corpus Poster, 2006
Screenprint on tan wove paper
Gift of the artist 2007.44.1

Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, American, b. 1964
*Flags, from the portfolio "An Indian from India (vol. 2)"*2005
Inkjet print
Gift from the Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Joseph A. Chazan 2008.118.7

In this work, Annu Palakunnathu Matthew addresses the colonizing gaze of ethnography by turning the camera onto herself. Wrapped in an American flag, she mirrors the image at left, in which a Native American woman surveys the viewer. As noted in the caption, the older image was taken during the 1913 Wanamaker Expedition, which documented Indigenous Americans as a “vanishing race.” Like other photographers working within the paternalistic and racist contexts of the time, the other artist here, most likely Baptist preacher Joseph K. Dixon, did not acknowledge the name or ethnic group of his subject.

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Matthew, born in India and currently a professor at the University of Rhode Island, examines British colonialism and Western expansionism as similarly dehumanizing endeavors.

Faith Ringgold, American, b. 1930
Martin Luther King, Jr., American, 1929 - 1968
Limited Editions Club
Letter from Birmingham City Jail, 2008
Book containing eight color screenprints
Georgianna Sayles Aldrich Fund 2009.85

In 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was arrested in Birmingham, Alabama, with 50 other demonstrators for nonviolent resistance. From his jail cell, he wrote a response to eight white clergymen who had chastised the "confrontational" nature of civil rights movement tactics, calling for protestors' "peaceful obedience" of the law, which allowed segregation. In his letter, King defends nonviolent direct action and the necessity of civil disobedience in confronting injustice.

Artist-activist Faith Ringgold has illustrated King's letter in eight serigraphs. Here, two "colored" children are denied access to Funtown, an Atlanta amusement park. The flags flying over what seems to be a wholesome American scene ask viewers to consider how many people have been systematically excluded from activities and institutions in service to whiteness.

Duane Slick, American, b. 1961, (RISD Faculty 1995-present, Painting and Printmaking)
Vestige (3AM Light), 2010
Acrylic on linen
Gift of Joseph A. Chazan, MD 2012.55

Here two faint images of white animal masks—bones?—emerge from a black background interspersed with white stars, suggesting the presence of a barely visible flag. This version of the flag is liable to disappear before your eyes. It is a residue, a fading mark. Slick, an enrolled member of the Meskwaki nation of Iowa, asks viewers to consider what happens in the liminal space between night and morning. His work grapples with the spiritual dimensions of Indigenous symbolism.

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Ronnie Goodman, American, b. ca. 1960
*The Birth of Occupy, from the portfolio "Occuprint"*2012
Screenprint on paper
Walter H. Kimball Fund 2012.70.1.17

Brad Kayal (b. 1978), American
*Job Creator, from the portfolio "Occuprint"*2011
Color screenprint on paper
Walter H. Kimball Fund 2012.70.1.6

Jessica Deane Rosner, American, b. 1958
The Election Gloves, 2011 - 2013
Rubber gloves, ink, embroidery, framed fabric flag, wooden shelf
Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund 2013.30

“You would think that worrying about who is going to lead our country would make all other concerns vanish or at least fade to a pale gray. But, for me, a huge crisis only piles on top of all my other worries. I find myself anxious about cleaning my home AND what happens if Roe v. Wade is overturned.”
–Jessica Deane Rosner

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Created during President Obama's re-election campaign, Rosner's dishwashing gloves recount her daily chores, creative challenges, and personal anxieties on one side. On the other, she outlines national and international headlines, sometimes critiquing political affairs. This text, initially written in detailed diary entries, was edited and rewritten on the gloves. The faded ink and rubber deterioration remind us that everything is ultimately ephemeral. The more permanent-looking flag, a bandana Rosner bought at the Army/Navy Surplus on Thayer Street, features simplified versions of the dishwashing gloves—a metanarrative on the interconnectedness of personal and political obligations.

Megan Foster, American, b. 1977, (RISD BFA 2000, Printmaking, Art History Concentration)
*Untitled, from the portfolio Prints for Protest*2017
Screenprint on paper
Museum Acquisition Fund 2017.10.2

American
Louisiana Purchase Exposition Souvenir Textile, after 1904
Printed cotton plain weave
Gift of Mrs. Constance Wharton Smith 58.165.15

This work, possibly a pillow cover, may have been a souvenir from the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. Its images depict the Bontoc Igorot people from the Philippines. The U.S. military colonized the Philippines in 1898, and in 1904 a group of Igorot was transported to St. Louis for an exhibition at the fair. Showcased as a constructed village, the group was made to enact their "exoticness" in ceremonial dances and other cultural practices for the consumptive gaze of onlookers. In the centermost panel, U.S. flags fly above the site.

Several Igorot personalities became well known, including Chief Antonio (middle left panel) and Antero Cabrera (known as Balonglong to his people), an orphan who acted as the group's interpreter.

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Cabrera and many others went back to Bontoc after being shown at Coney Island and other expositions. In 2000, Cabrera's granddaughter, Mia Antero Apolinar Abeya, returned to St. Louis to speak at Wydown Middle School, which now sits where the St. Louis World's Fair was once held. Her message commemorates her grandfather and the people whose culture was exploited.

American
Know-Nothing Party Banner, ca. 1850
Printed cotton plain weave
Gift of Mrs. Constance Wharton Smith 58.165.21

This work—which at first glance seems to refer to Indigenous Americans—was sponsored by the Know-Nothings, a semi-secret political party active in the mid-1800s. Racist, anti-immigrant, and anti-Catholic, the Know-Nothings were U.S.-born Protestants who proposed a 21-year residency requirement for citizenship and preventive measures against "foreigners" holding public office. The party ended soon after its founding, as members became divided on the issue of slavery.

George Washington is printed here in tribute to 18th-century American Whigs who fought for independence from Britain. Know-Nothings similarly believed they were patriotic in their 19th-century fight to protect the U.S. from outsiders. More than 160 years later, the Trump administration continues the promotion of xenophobia and exclusivity.

Anderson Bros., American, early 20th century
Betsy Ross Commemorative Handkerchief, early 1900s
Jacquard woven silk
Gift of Mrs. Constance Wharton Smith 58.165.30

Contrary to popular belief, no evidence supports the story that the first American flag was made by Betsy Ross, thought to be depicted here. The Ross myth, disseminated by Ross's grandson, coincided with the 1876 Centennial Exposition, which commemorated the 100-year anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. While Ross probably didn't design the first American flag, she was known to sew flags for the Pennsylvania Navy during the Revolutionary War.

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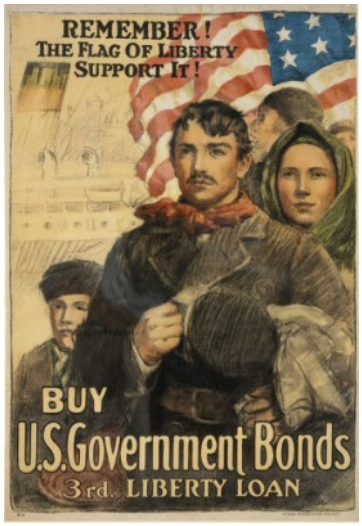
Heywood Strasser & Voigt Lithographic Company
Remember! The Flag of Liberty: Support it! Buy U.S. Government Bonds, 1918
Rotogravure on paper
Gift of Robert Leeson 69.001X.93



Richard Hamilton, British, 1922-2011
Dietz Offizin
Dorothea Leonhart
Kent State, 1970
Color screenprint on paper
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Brooke Alexander 73.075

For a week in May 1970, Richard Hamilton watched television and photographed what he saw on screen. Mechanically translating the violence happening at Kent State from his television to a print medium, Hamilton considered the ways information is distilled and transmitted to the public.

On May 4, 1970, when students at Kent State who were peacefully protesting the Vietnam War did not disperse, members of the Ohio National Guard fired 67 rounds of ammunition into the unarmed crowd, killing four. Nine others were injured, including Dean Kahler, depicted here, his fallen body seemingly enveloped in the colors of the flag. Kent State caused a national outcry, and four million students across the U.S. went on strike.

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James Van Der Zee, American, 1886-1983
Marcus Garvey and Garvey Militia, Harlem, 1924
Gelatin silver print
Museum purchase with the aid of funds from the National Endowment for the Arts 80.232.7

Freedom of assembly is protected by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, but that freedom has historically been limited for American citizens of color. Black Americans often have to justify their presence by being exceptional in every conceivable way. In Van Der Zee's image of demonstrators, Marcus Garvey leads members of the Universal Negro Improvement Association. Garvey's orderly African American participants contrast with the enraged white rioters in Garry Winogrand's photo (82.303.5). The sign reading "Impeach the Mayor" refers to New York mayor John V. Lindsey, who incurred the wrath of pro-war union laborers, sanitation workers, police, and others during his term.

Garry Winogrand, American, 1928-1984
*New York City, Garry Winogrand*1969
Gelatin silver print
Gift of Mr. Frederick J. Myerson 82.303.5

Freedom of assembly is protected by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, but that freedom has historically been limited for American citizens of color. Black Americans often have to justify their presence by being exceptional in every conceivable way. In Van Der Zee's image of demonstrators (80.232.7), Marcus Garvey leads members of the Universal Negro Improvement Association. Garvey's orderly African American participants contrast with the enraged white rioters in Garry Winogrand's photo. The sign reading "Impeach the Mayor" refers to New York mayor John V. Lindsey, who incurred the wrath of pro-war union laborers, sanitation workers, police, and others during his term.

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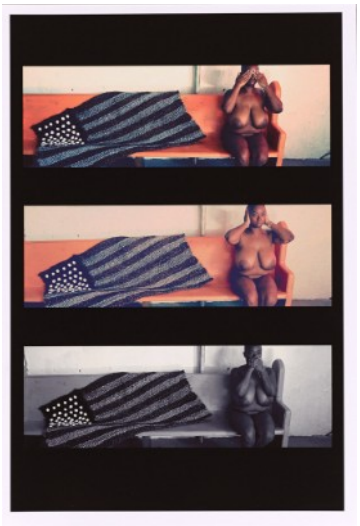

Tasha Dougé, Haitian, b. 1981
Jessica Tingling, American, b.1988
Oliver Tingling, American, b.1988
*See No, Hear No, Speak No Justice, from the series A Bed for Justice*2016
Color inkjet print
Walter H. Kimball Fund TL48.2018.1

In 2016, Haitian artist Tasha Dougé created a five-foot by three-foot flag made entirely from synthetic braiding hair, cotton, and chicken wire. Dougé's flag is an homage to enslaved Africans brought to America to toil here. The stars are cotton, an industry that fueled the expansion of the United States as well as centuries of persecution. Brown stripes represent the spectrum of melanin that constitutes Black people's skin tones; gray stripes, the years of ongoing oppression. The black canton speaks to Black experiences specific to the U.S. Lovingly nicknamed Justice, Dougé's flag appears in this photo series, in which she staged interventions around Philadelphia for one day. Lying on train tracks, sitting on a church pew, burdened by metaphorical weight—is Justice pinning Dougé down, or is she lifting Justice up?—the artist confronts racial inequality and identity.

Tasha Dougé, Haitian, b. 1981
Jessica Tingling, American, b.1988
Oliver Tingling, American, b.1988
*Justice Afterglow, from the series A Bed for Justice*2016
Color inkjet print
Walter H. Kimball Fund TL48.2018.2

In 2016, Haitian artist Tasha Dougé created a five-foot by three-foot flag made entirely from synthetic braiding hair, cotton, and chicken wire. Dougé's flag is an homage to enslaved Africans brought to America to toil here. The stars are cotton, an industry that fueled the expansion of the United States as well as centuries of persecution. Brown stripes represent the spectrum of melanin that constitutes Black people's skin tones; gray stripes, the years of ongoing oppression. The black canton speaks to Black experiences specific to the U.S. Lovingly nicknamed Justice, Dougé's flag appears in this photo series, in which she staged interventions around Philadelphia for one day. Lying on train tracks, sitting on a church pew, burdened by metaphorical weight—is Justice pinning Dougé down, or is she lifting Justice up?—the artist confronts racial inequality and identity.

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Tasha Dougé, Haitian, b. 1981
Jessica Tingling, American, b.1988
Oliver Tingling, American, b.1988
*The Eclipse of Justice, from the series A Bed for Justice*2016
Color inkjet print
Walter H. Kimball Fund TL48.2018.3

In 2016, Haitian artist Tasha Dougé created a five-foot by three-foot flag made entirely from synthetic braiding hair, cotton, and chicken wire. Dougé's flag is an homage to enslaved Africans brought to America to toil here. The stars are cotton, an industry that fueled the expansion of the United States as well as centuries of persecution. Brown stripes represent the spectrum of melanin that constitutes Black people's skin tones; gray stripes, the years of ongoing oppression. The black canton speaks to Black experiences specific to the U.S. Lovingly nicknamed Justice, Dougé's flag appears in this photo series, in which she staged interventions around Philadelphia for one day. Lying on train tracks, sitting on a church pew, burdened by metaphorical weight—is Justice pinning Dougé down, or is she lifting Justice up?—the artist confronts racial inequality and identity.

Kahlil Robert Irving
"Many Men, many, many, many, many men, wish death pon me,"
2017

TL61.2018.1

"How long before drastic changes are taken to rework the colonialist system that still shapes how we live? Until then, the work will continue to remind viewers of the past, and how colonialism has evolved into the present."
–Kahlil Robert Irving

This flag, one of three in the collection, serves as a memorial to and for the Black community. It takes its title from rapper 50 Cent's 2003 song "Many Men (Wish Death)." The stars symbolize lives lost to imprisonment and people murdered by police and civilians. Irving makes sculptures that address the political and economic realities of St. Louis, his hometown. His series Black Matter tackles mass incarceration, poverty, redlining, and the killing of unarmed Black Americans.

Every year in the United States, gun violence systemically controls, threatens, and murders thousands of Black and Brown people, as well

as people who belong to the LGBTQIA community. As school shootings proliferate, militarized police and white vigilantes continue to surveil and harass non-white people, often without consequence.